DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 168 EA 019 653

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TITLE The Gaston System: A Community Plans for the Future.
INSTITUTION National School Boards Association, Alexandria, VA.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Updating School Board Policies; v18 n7 p1-3 Jul-Aug 1987

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Board of Education Role; *Community Change; *Community Cooperation; Community Coordination; Community Development; *Community Involvement; *Community Planning; Community Responsibility; Community Support; Elementary Secondary Education; *Participative Decision Making; Problem Solving; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Gaston County School District NC; *North Carolina (Gaston County)

ABSTRACT

In response to pervasive problems of low income, anticipated loss of employment in the textile industry, high dropout rates, high crime rates, and poor relationships among municipalities, Gaston County, North Carolina, has developed an innovative set of processes for promoting cooperation and facilitating leadership techniques. The Gaston System consists of three key components: analyzing problems systematically, developing processes to increase citizen involvement in decisionmaking, and using innovative leadership techniques to facilitate these processes. The Gaston County School Board took the lead in drawing many groups and individuals together to build consensus for policy decisions. As a result of this participatory, consensus-building model for decisionmaking, a wide range of innovative ideas for school and community improvement have emerged, and a new positive community attitude is developing. Notable improvements in the last 7 years include reduction in school dropouts, innovative educational enrichment programs, a community forum to survey public opinion on essential issues, reduced unemployment and crime rates, and passage by 69 percent of the electorate of a $28 million bond for high technology solid waste disposal cogeneration plants. The process has also brought the educational, commercial, and municipal sectors of the community closer together in pursuing common goals. (TE)

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Volume 18/Number 7/July-August 1987

A component of the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association provided to NSBA Direct Affiliates and EPS subscribers

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by Rick Smyre

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The Gaston System: a community plans for the future

by Rick Smyre

Like most newly elected school board members, I began my board service determined to solve the problems facing local public schools. Moreover, I expected they would be solved within the six years that I intended to serve on the board. I thought I knew what the answers were.

Now, ten years later, I am still trying to ask the right questions. And others—beyond the school community—are, too.

New approaches

Gaston County, N.C., a community of 167,000, has made great strides in the last decade toward addressing its quality of life. But to survive as a community, an entirely new and innovative philosophy for the times, complete with processes for promoting cooperation and facilitating leadership techniques had to be developed.

Our process is called "The Gaston System." Although it is still evolving and is by no means perfect, it is beginning to receive national attention as one possible way of dealing with the complexity of community problems.

Change needed

Civilization is in transition from the industrial age into another type of society. John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends*, calls it the information age; others call it the post-industrial age. Whatever it is called, people are facing change of such magnitude that, at times, it defies understanding.

The growing sense in Gaston County is that more time must be spent understanding the times in which we are living in order to set goals and objectives for the future. Early on, it became apparent that county issues often were resolved without much thought about future implications, and few leaders spent time studying trends of the future.

Currently, a "futuring process," which has been planned by more than 150 citizens representing all segments of the community during the last year, is being introduced into the county. Between 500 and 1,000 citizens are anticipated to be involved in creating a "Vision of the Future for Gaston County—2020."

It will take a year to complete the initial process, which is being refined continuously. When completed, Gaston County should have a framework of goals and objectives for the critical areas of community life, including education.

Through this process, the complexity of the future should be more understandable to many citizens because they will have struggled to understand it as they established well-defined goals and objectives.

Background

What was the catalyst for all this activity in Gaston County?

In 1976, Gaston County faced the following:

- The highest dropout rate of any school system in North Carolina;
- A consolidation of three separate school systems resulting in much bitterness;
- Poor relationships among the 13 municipalities within the county—the largest number of jurisdictions in any county in the state;
- Poor relationships among many groups in both the public and private sectors—strong feelings of turfism;
- A poor community self-perception in relation to Charlotte, the major city in the state, twenty miles to the east;
- A limited middle class constituency;
- A perception of low wages creating a negative outside view of the textile industry;
- The expectation of losing 10,000 textile jobs in the decade 1976-87 (these jobs ultimately were lost);
- Third highest teen pregnancy rate in North Carolina;
- A high crime rate;
- A poor physical beauty image.

Reflecting on the reason behind The Gaston System, Tom Efird, past president of the Chamber of Commerce, says, "We felt that Gaston County had a poor image—low wages, domestic violence, alcoholism. We wanted to polish our image. How do you do that? By doing positive things."

The system

The Gaston System is one way to deal with the complexity of decision making at a local level in the context of rampant change in today's democracy. There are three key parts to the system:

- Analyzing problems systematically;
- Developing one or more processes to involve citizens in giving their opinions and perceptions;
- Using innovative leadership techniques to "facilitate" these processes.

continued on page 2

Rick Smyre, executive director of The Look Up Gaston Foundation, Gaston County, N. C., formerly served on the Gaston County School Board, including two years as chairman.

continued from page 1

The first step may be the most difficult. A look at a school problem shows just how elusive and untraditional this step is.

School board involvement

The present Gaston County school system of 31,000 students resulted from the consolidation of three separate school districts in 1967 based on a forecast of declining enrollment. At the time, a plan was developed to merge programs and facilities over time; the plan included building several new high schools.

There was resistance in several small communities, however, because they did not want to lose their identity by merging their high school with others into larger facilities outside municipal town limits. The feelings of many citizens reached the point where reason was not possible. Some court suits were initiated.

The decision to build the new high schools was made by a school board made up of nine elected representatives. The board was concerned about the lack of a comprehensive curriculum. As predicted, student enrollment began to decline; financial resources decreased.

The decision to consolidate was defined in strictly "educational" terms, and was correct from that one educational point of view. Ten years later, however, one of the planned high schools still was not built, and there was persistent bitterness among many citizens of the county.

Those in the two communities that still had not consolidated their high schools focused on keeping their "community" school. Those in other areas of the county who had already built a new consolidated high school complained because others had not been forced to follow the plan.

In 1978, the school board began to realize that the "issues" went beyond education. Consolidation also affected a community's need for identity and its perception of itself. It focused on the way in which the decision had been made: "You people forced this down our throats!" It focused on the fact that the county commissioners were vacillating on providing the funds for the final new high school. The issue also focused on the lack of interest at that time (which has completely changed since) of business and the private sector in the area of public education.

In other words, the school board had only identified one or two of the five or six critical factors involved. The board did not realize that, as good as we thought our board was, it did not include people who understood all parts of the issue. The board had defined the issue from an educational perspective, but had no real expertise from a political, social, or business point of view. The problem had not been defined systematically within the framework of the community.

The result: roadblocks from citizens, public officials, and politicians. These roadblocks caused the board to step away from dealing with the issue in the short run and ask the question: What should we have done differently?

Importance of process

Says Bill Seabrook, former county school board chairman, "We often would jump to the bottom line trying to respond to some special interest group. Yet later it would be obvious that we had acted too quickly and had not taken into consideration enough interdependent factors."

Another realization was that not enough people had been included in the decision-making "process." For educational excellence to occur, the board realized, there must be representation from many sectors of the community brought together to deal with "educational" issues. The school board became the "facilitator" for developing consensus on issues of policy.

Board members' "egos" had to be put aside. As a group of leaders, it was the board's role to draw as many groups and individuals as needed into a decision-making process to make a "decision of excellence." It soon became obvious that changing the way input was given to develop a policy was even more important than the decision itself.

Groups began to see their ideas become policy as a result of a consensus-building process, and the level of criticism of the board began to recede. Soon the board began hearing nothing but compliments about "our" decisions. It finally struck us: "Our positive decisions" were the perceptional result of getting many people involved in giving input. It was the process that was key!

Concentum

The Gaston County School Board first used this consensus building idea of "process" in the late 1970s. A new word was coined: consentum. Consentum is a particular type of committee that includes representatives from all groups that should have input in developing policy recommendations to the board on a particular issue. These groups include teachers, parents on school advisory committees, principals, students, business people, and county political leaders.

When used effectively, this process has produced outstanding results. The key is for a school board to be consistant in its use. If newly elected school board members do not understand the concept of process, or do not buy into its use, citizens will again find fault with decisions made.

It is important to understand that the use of process is not an abdication of responsibility as an elected representative. In fact, it is the proper response to a change in times.

The fast pace of change and the increased competence of many individuals demand a system of input and decision making that moves away from decisions by a few, whether business leaders or a school board. This does not mean that authority is delegated to committee decision making. It does mean that leaders have to redefine their role and become *facilitators* of decisions. They have to learn how to structure processes properly so that representatives of many groups spend time helping to define problems and then offering

Updating School Board Policies is published eleven times annually and provided to every board member and the policy administrator of school districts that participate in the National School Boards Association's Direct Affiliate Program or subscribe to NSBA's Educational Policies Service. EPS Staff: Dale Gaddy, director, education and management services department; Brenda Z. Greene, editor; Eve Shepard, clearinghouse manager.

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suggestions to a board that has the final authority.

Facilitating leadership

There are many ways to be a facilitator of ideas, programs, and processes. The importance of getting people to work together in a group requires a keen understanding of how diverse people interact, and an acquired ability to deal with any problem that arises.

The concept of facilitating leadership is based on leaders caring for others as well as themselves. It demands a disciplined approach and an ability to laugh at oneself. Used properly, facilitating leadership allows groups to build agreement over a period of time, whether one week or one year.

It is important for any group of leaders, including a school board, to be perceived as truly wanting the opinions of diverse groups. A "trained" facilitator makes the "process" work toward that agreement by managing discussion, not manipulating it.

Are there shortcuts?

Could the process be speeded up? Surely!

Does it take so many people to make a decision about goals and objectives? No!

Can't a community get to the bottom line without such a frustrating and time-consuming process? Absolutely!

But enough people have to agree with, accept, and understand the decision if it is to work.

It is difficult to reach consensus. There is little trust among people. Vietnam and Watergate undercut citizen acceptance of authority and no efficient system of decision making has been developed to restore respect for leadership in a community. Also, more people are educated and feel capable of making decisions.

The key hope of The Gaston System is that it will enable consensus to be reached. And the benefits already are visible. People are taking pride in doing it together. A new positive community attitude is slowly developing, but not without tough problems to resolve. Until these new ideas and techniques are seen to be used continously, it will be two steps forward and one step backward.

A new philosophy

The Gaston System ties ideas, processes, and innovative leadership techniques into a new "philosophy of the times." It recognizes that old ways must be updated to deal with complicated future issues; programs, events, and projects must reflect the vision of a broad-based community process.

The ability of leaders to help develop a system for addressing the future and their commitment to use it is necessary. The leaders in Gaston County are beginning to use the concepts of The Gaston System because they helped to develop it.

Instead of always looking for what is wrong with a new suggestion, citizens are trying to "hitch hike" their opinions onto a good idea to make it even better. That is why the slogan of The Look Up Gaston Foundation has become "Building a Future Sense of Community Together." The idea that it is in our self-interest to cooperate is gradually being learned.

How do we know it is working? We can only look at significant changes in attitudes of many people and what others are beginning to say about Gaston County. But since the concept of process started in the public school system, a comment recently made to a county leader by Margaret Gayle, of the North Carolina state education department and co-author, with Marvin Cetron, of *Schools of the Future*, gives a good indication of the change in substance and perception that has occurred. Said Gayle, "I never would have thought that so many innovative ideas would be coming from Gaston. In the last seven years, you people have progressed twenty." ■

Gaston County's road to recovery

As a result of broad citizen participation, the quality of life in Gaston County is marked by noticeable improvement. Some of the achievements are:

- Reduction in school dropouts;
- A state reputation for innovative educational programs, including an annual science fair involving 18,000 projects and a summer enrichment experience for 60 rising tenth graders;
- The first computerized food service system in North Carolina;
- A new process through which school policy is developed by "consentums"—groups made up of representatives from teachers, students, adult advisory councils, administrators, the business community, and the school board;
- Planting of over 8,000 crepe myrtle trees to beautify the county;
- The development of a new way—the Community Forum—to find out a broad cross section of citizen opinion (Through this opinion survey process, the school board found out that 59.1 percent of the respondents would be willing to have their taxes raised to support basic education in the future. Other issues already addressed through the Forum are economic development concerns, leisure time uses, and alcohol and drug abuse problems.);
- A downtown festival sponsored by the Arts and Science Council, which brought 20,000 to Main Street Gastonia despite an all-day downpour;
- An annual county birthday party in the small town of Dallas where over 3,000 people celebrated a new sense of community cooperation;
- A county unemployment rate of 5.8%, an important fact in light of the loss of 10,000 textile jobs in a decade;
- Significant reduction in crime rate;
- Passage of a $28 million bond by 69 percent of the electorate for a high technology solid waste disposal cogeneration plant;
- The development of a "Futuring Process" through which many citizens will be involved in developing goals and objectives for the year 2020 in critical areas of community life.

Eight of these accomplishments are in areas that appear to be other than education. Actually, they are not.

"Overall" quality of life is recognized as important in setting a positive tone for a community to support public education. Also, the ability to solve many of the problems in a community demands a broadened definition of what comprises education. The need for life-long learning and interest and involvement in developing different aspects of community life is recognized. The focus of education is no longer narrowly defined in terms of only public education, but also in terms of how the business community is changing and how the political sector affects the community's view of educational achievement.